

## “Finding Redemption on the Threshing Floor”

### (The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 70)

Ruth 3 – 4

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Ruth the Moabite has come to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. She has been gleaning barley in the fields, where wealthy landowner Boaz has offered her generous hospitality. But now, weeks later, the barley harvest has come to an end. Where are Naomi and Ruth going to get food to live on now?

This time it's Naomi who comes up with a plan. Once again it involves Boaz – a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, and therefore one of Naomi's "redeemers," who were supposed to look out for her welfare. "Tonight," Naomi says to Ruth, "he will be winnowing barley.... You should bathe, put on some perfume, wear nice clothes, and then go down to the threshing floor. Don't make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, notice the place where he is lying. Then go, uncover his feet, and lie down. And he will tell you what to do." (Ruth 3.2-4)

Okay, this is *loaded*. Let's take it one piece at a time. First, the *threshing floor*. Barley had to be threshed after it was harvested. The sheaves would be brought to a large outdoor threshing floor. Typically, it would be outside town, close enough so it could be easily protected, but far enough out so that the chaff wouldn't blow into the city. It would have been large, where many people would be able to work simultaneously, with piles of grain all around them. The workers would pound the sheaves on the threshing floor, loosening the kernels from the husks. Then the grain would be thrown up in the air. The heavier kernels would fall back down and be collected, while the chaff would blow away. It was a busy place at harvest time – and it seems, on this particular night, there was a harvest celebration going on, with eating and drinking and merrymaking. Boaz and all his fieldhands are going to be there.

Naomi tells Ruth to *bathe*, put on *perfume*, and wear *nice clothes*. Look your best. Be attractive. Advertisers know: if you want to get a man's attention, you put a beautiful woman in front of him. You want to sell some cars? Put some pretty women in the commercial. Selling beer? Put some pretty women in the ad. It's a strategy that has worked from pretty much the dawn of time. But the problem is that Ruth isn't beautiful. Other biblical women are beautiful – Sarah was so pretty that it worried her husband Abraham; Esther won the "Miss Persia" beauty contest – but we are never told that Ruth was attractive. So Naomi tells her: make yourself look and smell as beautiful as you can. Dress to impress.

Ruth is to go to the threshing floor, and basically wait till the party's over before doing anything.

She just has to note where Boaz lies down. It wouldn't do for her to curl up with the wrong man! Then, once Boaz is resting, she is to "uncover his feet" and lie down next to him. That word "feet" might not mean "feet." There are several places in the Old Testament where the word "feet" seems to be a euphemism for something else, higher up the legs. (Exodus 4.25; Judges 3.24; 2 Samuel 11.8; Isaiah 6.2; Isaiah 7.10 – though many translators omit the word "feet" in their translation of those verses). Just how much of Boaz's body is Ruth instructed to uncover? The text is not explicit, but it's suggestive enough to make many interpreters – ancient, medieval, and modern – think: *it wasn't just his feet*.

Then comes Naomi's final comment: "And he will tell you what to do." Naomi seems to think that's all Ruth needs to do. Boaz will take care of the rest. The goal is to find a way to get food to eat on a regular basis. We might wonder: what does *showing up at a party uninvited, dressed to impress, lying down next to Boaz under cover of night, and uncovering his "feet"* have to do with *that*?!?

Ruth heads to the threshing floor. "Boaz ate and drank, and he was in a good mood. He went over to lie down by the edge of the grain pile. Then she quietly approached, uncovered his feet, and lay down." (Ruth 3.7) Presumably he is asleep before she "uncovers" him. "During the middle of the night, the man shuddered" – remember, this is happening outdoors; there might have been a breeze, and Boaz is rather exposed! He "turned over – and there was a woman lying at his feet." (Ruth 3.8) *Surprise!!!*

His immediate response: "Who are you?" (Ruth 3.9) It's almost exactly the same question he asked her when they first, in his field, in broad daylight. He wanted to know who she was. Now, circumstances are *vastly* different – but the question is essentially the same. What woman *is* this?!?

She replies: "I'm Ruth your servant." (Ruth 3.9) Not, "Ruth the Moabite." Not, "Ruth the daughter-in-law of Naomi." No: she is "Ruth, your servant." She is putting herself at his mercy.

Then comes the kicker. Up to this point Ruth has followed Naomi's instructions to the letter. Now, she departs from the script. Naomi had told Ruth to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Instead, *Ruth* takes charge. She says to Boaz: "Spread your robe over your servant, because you are a redeemer." (Ruth 3.9) Does she mean "robe" – is she telling him to take the garment she has removed from his "feet" and literally put it over her? Is she cold? How much is *she* wearing?!? Or is it metaphorical? Earlier in the story, in Ruth's first encounter with Boaz, in the field, he had blessed Ruth with the words, "May you receive a rich reward from the LORD, under whose wings you've come to seek refuge." (Ruth 2.12) That was metaphorical – God doesn't really have "wings"! – the "robe" here might be just as metaphorical as those wings were. Ruth may be saying, "Take care of me. I need your help."

So what does Boaz do? He's lying there, in the dark, in the middle of the night, with his feet (or more!) uncovered, with a woman curled up next to him, dressed to impress, in a highly evocative position. He's single, an eligible bachelor. What would most bachelors do if they were in that position?

Here's what Boaz does: he *blesses* her. Again. "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter! You have acted even more faithfully than you did at first." Boaz – in the heat of the moment – is still thinking about *God*. Despite his surprise, despite his relative state of undress, despite the young woman curled up next to him, he refrains from engaging in any hanky-panky, and keeps the conversation

focused on Ruth's good nature and on God's loving hand. *Nothing happens* between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor. Nothing! Except this: Boaz resolves to take Ruth under his wing. "Don't be afraid," he says to her. "I'll do for you everything you are asking." (Ruth 3.11) He remembers: he's one of Naomi's redeemers. But there's another redeemer, another relative closer to Naomi than Boaz is, who *should* be making sure that Naomi's and Ruth's needs are being taken care of. That other relative isn't doing his job. That's the fundamental problem that led Ruth to the threshing floor. Naomi *thought* that Ruth was going to have to use her feminine wiles to attract Boaz's attention. But no. Boaz is a man of honor, a man with integrity, who wants to do what's right *just because it's the right thing to do*.

The story moves on from there to a very happy ending. Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with more grain, but only after the dark hours of the night have passed, for Ruth's own safety. In the morning, Boaz confronts the other relative, the one who hasn't been performing his familial obligation. With the elders of the city gathered around, Boaz explains the situation. Naomi will sell the family plot and give the proceeds to the man who redeems her, which the man can use to provide for her welfare. The man agrees to this arrangement and is willing to fulfill his duty – until he learns that there is a catch: in this case, the redeemer will also be required to marry Ruth, to carry on Naomi's family line. Ruth – the foreigner. Ruth – the *Moabite*. This, the man does not want to do. Boaz makes it clear: one of the two of them needs to say "yes" to the terms, and if the other man is not willing to do so, then Boaz will. The man replies: "Redeem it for yourself. You can have my right of redemption." (Ruth 4.6) The elders witness this legally-binding transaction, which effectively makes Ruth an Israelite despite her Moabite origins. Then Boaz and Ruth are joyfully married. Ruth becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son named Obed, giving Naomi a grandson she never expected she would have. Everybody rejoices in the grace that God has shown to Naomi. Naomi and Ruth are well cared for, to the end of their days. Obed grows up, gets married, and has a son named Jesse; Jesse grows up, gets married, and has a son named David. David grows up, becomes King of all Israel, and his line continues unbroken over ten centuries, ultimately giving rise to a carpenter in Nazareth named Joseph, who is engaged to a young woman named Mary – and you know the rest of *that* story. There are numerous happy endings to this story. It provides a pivotal link in the chain that leads from Abraham to Jesus, from Genesis to the gospels; and it's a fabulous story of redemption, of God's grace at work in the lives of two needy women.

It also contains a couple important lessons. First: when you find yourself in a compromising position – as Boaz did on the threshing floor – where you are given a choice between your *carnal desires* and your *Christian values*, which do you choose? Boaz could have acted *so differently* than he did! He chose the path of honor. What do *you* do, when you're faced with a choice between *desire* and *virtue*? Is your commitment to Jesus Christ *strong enough* that you would make the *honorable* choice?

Second: a man in this story *should* have been looking out for the welfare of the needy members of his extended family – but wasn't. If he had, Ruth wouldn't have needed to approach Boaz for help. Are there people in your extended family who are *needy*? People whom you need to be *looking out for*? Family members who truly *need* your protection, your care, your nurture? Who are they? Who in your extended family *isn't getting* the kind of support they really need – and what can *you* do to change that?

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